

Introducing the New Head Start Program Performance Standards

Overview: Program Structure

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Dr. Blanca Enriquez: Welcome to this overview on Program Structure. I want to introduce Beth Meloy and Ann Linehan as they walk us through this new section of the Performance Standards related to program options.

Ann Linehan: We are going to do a very brief overview of the Subpart B section of the Head Start Performance Standards on Program Structure. I have to say, Beth, probably this is the one section that our teachers and managers will read a thousand times over. There is a lot of nitty gritty here. A lot of good detail, but hopefully we will whet your appetite today.

Beth, the Program Structure section is foundational to how programs design their services, and as we all know by now, one of the biggest changes in the new Performance Standards, and in Head Start's recent history is a move towards longer service hours. Could you tell us a little bit about the research that helped us decide to get to this position in the final rule?

Beth Meloy: Sure. Well, for starters, we have decades of research that tells us that the most critical years in a child's life really is those first five years. And that we have an opportunity with early education services to really impact their learning, their school readiness, and their health. And that those benefits can really not just benefit children individually, but benefit society as a whole. On the other hand, we also have ample research that tells us that children from vulnerable backgrounds, children who are at high risk start school already as much as a year behind.

And so, we really see early childhood education as an opportunity to close that school readiness gap, and the research has been mounting that demonstrates that children really need adequate time in early learning programs in order to see significant impacts. So research for the young children, research for full day pre-K, full day Kindergarten, summer learning lost research. All of these different areas and really on effective teaching and curricular practices really show us that teachers need more time in the classroom with children in order to reap the benefits of early childhood education.

Ann: So when we talk about duration and we talk about now teachers having more time in the classroom to do rich learning experience with the children, can you give us a little bit of a comparison? Now we are talking about for our preschoolers, over a program year being in 1,020 hours and our Early Head Start kids being, I want to say 1,380. And how does that compare with what the final rule now will require to what our kids are currently getting?

Beth: Yes, so many of our programs are already providing adequate learning time and really providing 1,020 hours or even more than 1,020 hours to preschool children or the 1,380 if it's in toddlers. But

heads up programs that are operating under our previous minimums are serving children for less than half the amount of time of that 1,020.

Ann: And of course, I'm just so happy about the Early Head Start, and I think it's getting us back to what Congress originally intended. Could you speak to that a little bit?

Beth: That's right. Research on continuity of care and the importance of continuity of care really for all children is really a long standing literature and we really know that continuity of care is so important for all children, but it's really, really important for the babies, for our infants and toddlers. And Congress recognized that and has always defined Early Head Start as a continuous program, and so what we are really doing with that 1,380 is just codifying what Congress has always intended, and really just trying to make sure that kids get the continuity of care that they need.

Ann: That's terrific. So this is a really meaty section of the Standards. Could you tell us a little bit about the Program Structure?

Beth: Yes, so Subpart P on Program Structure is divided into five sections. The first is about determining your Program Structure, and it emphasizes that programs need to select a program option or program options that really meet the needs of the children and families in their community. It makes it perfectly clear that no matter what program option you choose, you have to be delivering the full array of comprehensive services to all children. It also includes information for the first time about what programs have to do, have to include in their application, when they want to convert slots from Early Head Start to Head Start.

Ann: And this also speaks to the connectedness, the inter-relatedness with the other sections, as you were talking about, this is where programs are selecting their program options and choosing, making so many decisions about how they are delivering the services, it really connects to the data, data, data, data that they should be collecting, because they are making these decisions based on a variety of data sources that I think we see described particularly in the program management section. So I just want to put a plug in for that.

Beth: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Ann: And a little bit more about, what else is in the Program Structure section?

Beth: So the meat, the really central part of the Program Structure section includes all of the requirements for each of our three standard program options, so now in the new Head Start Performance Standards, there are three standard program options: center-based, home-based, and family child care. And what it includes is information about the ratios or the case load in home-based, the service duration as well as the licensing requirements or really how we are going to make sure that in each of those program options we are keeping children safe.

Ann: And I think what's significant, there are changes from the old Head Start Performance Standards, so people really need to read and really note where we have provided more flexibility, where we have increased, where we have decreased, but this is really a very, very critical part of the Standards. Anything else that you could think of that would be important? I know that we are going to talk more in-depth in other tapings, but I know the home-based one was one that got a lot of comments from what we did in the NPRM, so you said it's an option, but who is it an option for?

Beth: So home-based is an option for preschoolers and for infants and toddlers and that's a really important thing to highlight. The one thing that we have, the one limitation we have set on that option is that if you are offering home-based as a program option for your preschoolers, you have to be offering another one of the options as well. Either center-based, family child care, or a locally designed program option, which is actually a great segue into the final section of Program Structure, which goes into the details about if you want or what you can request a waiver for.

So there are a lot of separate requirements like we talked about for each of those program options, and there are certain things that you can request a waiver for, and then also what you have to include in your request, or what you have to demonstrate as a program in order to receive a waiver.

Ann: And I think those are very clearly written.

Beth: Thank you.

Ann: Yes. So I think the last thing, and I know, again, we are going to get more in depth, but as programs listen to even this very short overview, they are going to be thinking about, "Oh wow, we got to make some changes." And is there time here for programs to sort of reflect and reassess and figure out where they need to make adjustments?

Beth: Yes, there absolutely is time. So we'll get into the details of the timeline in other videos, but it is important to note that if you are already providing a locally designed program option, you can continue to do that until July 31, 2018, so you have about two years. And there are also delayed compliance dates for some of the other duration requirements, and that's really purposeful on the part of the Office of Head Start, because we really want for programs to be able to, like you said, use their data, be intentional about meeting the needs of the families and children in their own communities.

Ann: So I think whatever information is in this section will be a lot of fuel for good discussions for both the Policy Council and the Board of Directors and the management teams, and articulating clearly to staff what these new regulations will need for them in the classroom or in the family child care or in the home-based settings. So we think that this is exciting, folks. And we know you are going to dig into this section and we think there is going to be a lot of communication with our regional office staff about this section. So thank you very much.

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